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THE FIGHTER

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

Author of "Caleb Conover, Railroadman," "Dr. Dale," "On Glory's Trail," etc.

NEW YORK
FRANK F. LOVELL COMPANY

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(Continued.)

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"Eighty dollars?" he repeated. "How long'd it take you to write it out?"

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"H'm! Not so bad. Hundred an' sixty dollars a week with Sunday off. Why don't you stick to that instead of messin' around with the law?"

"It was the tenth story I'd sent them," confessed Hawarden heroically. "And it was the first one they took."

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"So, as things stand now," pursued Caleb, "you've no real money. No sure prospect. An' you've no money."

"Dey Shevlin. You want her to share your nothin'-a-year. Or," he grated, "maybe you think it'd be nice to live on her cash?"

"I think nothing of the sort!" flared Hawarden, scarlet with anger. "I'll not stand that sort of talk even from her guardian. I wouldn't touch a penny of any woman's money if I were starving! I—"

"That sounds kind of like a book too," commented Caleb. "But you mean it. I'm glad you do. I think I kind of like you. So, instead of throwin' you downstairs, I'm goin' to waste a whole minute talkin' to you. You're a nice kid. You come here bristlin' with book learnin' an' ideas of honor an' you make your little speech to the stony hearted guardian an' stop."

"You can't even say 'I've got ten dollars a week of my own. I'll give it all to her.' You've no money—no prospect. An' you want her to exchange herself for that. Her that could marry a millionaire if she wanted to."

"I'm willing that the engagement should be a long one," hesitated the boy, battling futilely against the vulgar truth of Caleb's speech.

"I won't ask her to marry me till I am able to support her,—to support her well."

"An' in the meantime," urged Conover, with merciless logic, "in the meantime, she's to have the pleasure of sittin' by, eatin' her heart out, waitin' for you to come back."

"You're losin' good chances,—bein' side-tracked at parties an' so on, because she's engaged an' no longer in the marriage market, waitin' for you."

"Her youth's gone,—just on the chance that you'll some day be able to support a wife? You don't know."

"You're only just foolish. But look the thing in the eyes an' tell me: Is it square? Is it an honest bargain you offer? Aren't you cheatin' the one girl in the world you ought to do most for?"

"But with such an incentive," pleaded the boy, "I'd surely make my way quickly. In a year at the most I'd work—I'd work so hard for her!"

Caleb leaned to one side and threw open the window by his desk. With the warm soft air of Spring rushed in the steam of sibilance and clangor of the railway yards.

"Look down there!" ordered Conover, pointing out. "More'n a hundred men in that yard, ain't there? Dirty-faced men with stooped shoulders an' soiled clothes. Not a one of 'em that's got a fam'ly resemblance to Romeo. What are they doin' workin'! Every one of 'em's workin' harder than you or any of your fam'ly ever worked or ever could work. How'd their faces get dirty an' stooped an' their clothes soiled? By workin'! An' who are they workin' for? For themselves? Not them. Each one of 'em's workin' for some woman. An' most of 'em for a bunch of old, decrepit, old women."

"I don't see any of 'em gatherin' in front of the footlights an' singin' a chorus about how happy they are, or how their hand work has made them wives rich an' lazy. Are you any better'n they are? Can you work any harder for Desree than they are workin' for the slatternly, slouch-sided, down-at-heel women at home? Don't you suppose every one of those men once planned to make his wife a lady an' to 'consecrate his toil to her? Think it over, son; an' get a better argument than the silly fact that you're willin' to do your dooty by workin' for Desree. Hell's wait till you grow up an' get a job before you talk 'bout marryin'. But it's her affair. Not mine. If she wants you she can have you. If she don't want you—all the consent I could give wouldn't amount to a hoot in Hades. Personally, I think you'd better wait till you grow up an' get a job before you talk 'bout marryin'. But it's her affair. Not mine. If she wants you she can have you. But it's up to her. It's past me. An' now trot along. You've taken more of my time than you could pay for in a dozen thirteen page stories. Don't stop to thank me, Chase."

"Still," finished Caleb, "it hadn't ought to be hey? Most things hadn't. I've wasted a lot of time an' a lot of bad taste over you. I don't know why I did it, except that I always like to jaw after I've had a big fight on. It kind of lets off steam. There's the answer in a nutshell. I'm Miss Shevlin's guardian. What Miss Shevlin wants, she's going to have. If I have to buy the White House for her. If she wants you she can have you. If she don't want you—all the consent I could give wouldn't amount to a hoot in Hades. Personally, I think you'd better wait till you grow up an' get a job before you talk 'bout marryin'. But it's her affair. Not mine. If she wants you she can have you. But it's up to her. It's past me. An' now trot along. You've taken more of my time than you could pay for in a dozen thirteen page stories. Don't stop to thank me, Chase."

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"But I do thank you a thousand times!" exclaimed the awkward, shaking hands with boyish vehemence. "I am—I'm awfully obliged to you. When I came I was afraid I'd meet some such fat, old man, Mr. Blacard."

"What's that?"

"About Mr. Blacard?" asked the boy, with a new interest.

"You heard? He was in the morning papers. It seems he was jumping on a moving street car, up at the Capitol, yesterday afternoon, when his foot slipped on the steps and he was dragged along, face downward, for nearly half a block. Two of his ribs were broken, and he was covered with bruises. The papers say his face was battered almost beyond recognition."

"Too bad!" remarked Conover drily. "Folks ought to be careful how they try to jump onto heavy-movin' things. Sometimes there's apt to be a surprise for the jumper. Now clear out! You can run off all day what I said if you want to. No, don't go thankin' me again. It's up to her, as I told you. Most likely, she'll send you about your business in a long!"

Waving out the bewildered, delighted youth, Caleb threw himself back in his leather chair and fished from a case the ever-present cigar. He drew a long, slow, unheeded puff. But he gave it no heed. With a queer, wholly inexplicable contraction at the heart he lay there, thinking. At first he tried to laugh at the memory of the boy's loftily worded pretensions. What Caine had said about Desree marrying "the right man." Hawarden came of good family. His parents were among the best people in Granite. As his wife, Desree, could probably take and hold any social position she chose. He was a nice boy, too. And she'd do his work for him. There was much to be said for the match. Preposterous as it had at first seemed. After all, why not?

A clear, ringing voice came. Conover's mouth set in a grim smile as he glanced at it.

"Send him in," he said, moving across to his desk and looking at the door. "I'll hold him a levee of the aristocracy this mornin'."

Reuben Standish, gaunt, gray and stiff as ever, ushered into a private office. The old man's face was a monotone of drab, save for a ruddy patch on either cheek bone where consumption flamed. He looked at Caleb greeted him with a nod and motioned him to a seat.

"I hope I have not broken in upon your morning," said Standish, glancing at the mountain of letters and papers on the desk.

"All my work's important," answered Caleb, "if it is to do with an office boy do it while I loafed. Want anything special?"

"First of all," evaded Standish, in the courtly old-world manner that Caleb always found so jarring, "permit me to congratulate you on your great victory at the Capitol yesterday."

"I was defeated entirely through your own personal endeavors. It must be a great thing to witness so powerful an influence over one's fellow men."

"Say," interposed Caleb, "quit standin' on the distant hilltop makin' peace terms. Come on down an' tell me what you want. Make it as short as you can."

It appeared that Mr. Standish wanted much to say, but he seemed to be unable to condense his wishes to the degree Caleb suggested. This, however, was of little account, since the Fighter already foreknew the other's mind. He listened with only perfunctory attention to a recital of the Aaron Burr Bank's needs, of the stringency of debts, and the danger of "run" with still less heed to the tale of an unwelcome depression in certain stocks wherein Mr. Standish's interest was purely marginal. As the story ended, Conover said curtly:

"To sum it up, you're broke. You want me to make deposits to loan you a bank an' you want a personal loan besides."

Standish started to speak. Caleb motioned him back the worded. "How much?" he asked. "How much in all? Don't hem an' haw, man. You've got the amount fixed in your mind, down to the last cent. You know how much you really need. Start off with the biggest sum first. How much?"

Standish tremulously blurted out his statement. When one was dealing with a boor like this Conover, there was surely no need for finesse. The fellow was blind to the finer shades of business dealings as to the usages of genteel life. Therefore, why hesitate or leave him to guess the amount from sadn' up seas of delicate hints. A low-browed boor; though a decidedly convenient one to cultivate—at times. The present being most emphatically one of those times, Standish with ruffled dignity laid bare his financial soul.

And the big, red haired man lolled back in the opposite chair watching his stately visitor from between alert, half-shut eyes. The Fighter had waited, worked, planned, for months. This very interview. Had Standish been better versed in sign-reading, he might have seen marks of Conover's passage all along the tortuous financial trail that had at last led to the private office and still more private confession.

But Standish had fallen not only into the trap but into the fatal mistake that had, a century earlier, in France, caused the severance of a goodly number of noble heads. The error of underestimating a proletarian opponent. And now, unwittingly, he was about to pay the price.

"Well," observed Caleb, when the facts stood forth, marshaled in their sorry array. "How does all this interest me?"

"I beg your pardon?" halted Standish.

"I say, how does this interest me? Why should I interest myself in don't this mighty big word for you? Why don't you turn to some of your own business associates—some men of your own class? Why do you come here?"

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